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SUBJECT: UGANDA: DISTRICT PROLIFERATION AS POLITICAL PATRONAGE

¶11. (SBU) Summary: On November 11, Uganda revealed plans to create seven new administrative districts in addition to the 14 districts already proposed for 2009 and 2010. Opposition parties and civil society groups have demanded a halt to creating new districts until after the February 2011 elections, citing concerns over their cost and role as political patronage tools. European donors have also expressed concern, as each new district spreads their budget support that much thinner. The Ugandan government, however, continues to reward battleground constituencies with new districts and new government jobs. End Summary.

District Proliferation

¶12. (U) On November 11, Minister of Lands Adolf Mwesige asked Parliament to approve the creation of seven new administrative districts on top of the 14 districts already slated for creation in 2009 and 2010. If approved, this will bring the total number of administrative districts to 101, or three times the 33 districts existing when Museveni took power in 1986. The government argues that new districts will bring government services closer to people as many rural Ugandans live hours from the seat of their local district headquarters.

¶13. (SBU) Presidential advisor Moses Byaruhangha told the Embassy that Uganda is trying to carve out districts for discrete ethnic groups so citizens can conduct local government business in their respective local languages. He said the plan would also enable teachers to use local languages for instruction in primary schools. He dismissed the view that trying to reduce local administrative structures to single homogenous ethnic units could actually exacerbate ethnic divisions.

¶14. (SBU) However, the re-districting process is already fueling conflict as groups scramble to claim resources and carve out their own local governments. Ongoing discussions to split the Tororo district in eastern Uganda along ethnic lines is exacerbating tensions between the area's ethnic Iteso and Jopadholo populations. Likewise, Acholi leaders in northern Uganda have accused the Jonam community of land grabbing to create a new district. Both sides met in Nebbi, just north of Lake Albert, on November 11 to calm fears of violence.

Unfunded and Unnecessary

¶15. (SBU) According to the Commissioner for Local Councils, Patrick Mutabwire, all of the 39 districts created between 2005 and 2009 depend on the central government to cover 90 percent of their expenditures. At the moment, government service provision in new districts remains poor or nonexistent.

¶16. (U) Viewing the creation of the new districts as a Presidential re-election tool, opposition parties have repeatedly demanded a moratorium on new districts until after the February 2011 elections. The Director of Uganda's NGO Forum, Richard Ssewakiryanga, argued

that instead of benefiting local populations, new unfunded districts are further impoverishing them, and added that Ugandans want roads and doctors, not new administrative districts. European donors responsible for providing the Ugandan government with budget support have also expressed concern, as the creation of each new district spreads finite financial resources thinner and means donor funds for administrative rather than programmatic costs.

Will More Districts Mean More NRM Votes?

¶ 17. (SBU) According to the Commissioner for Local Councils, new district start up costs range from USD 300,000 for smaller districts to USD 1 million for larger ones, and each new district employs between 250 to 500 local government employees/ new districts are attractive job creation mechanisms for the Ugandan government. These appointments provide a chance for the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) to reward specific constituencies and individuals, or entice opposition members back into the NRM camp.

¶ 18. (U) On November 14 an editorial in the opposition newspaper said the "creation of districts for political expediency in the face of spiralling public expenditure is therefore retrogressive and unacceptable to the Ugandan tax payer." The African Peer Review Mechanism's 2009 review for Uganda stated: "the proliferation of districts that are created largely on political grounds, and not on the basis of economic viability, has become a controversial issue that requires a political solution."

¶ 19. (SBU) Many, but not all, of these new districts are in areas where the NRM suffered significant election losses in 2006, when

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opposition presidential candidate Kizza Besigye won 19 of 69 existing districts. Five of these 19 districts were split between 2006 and 2009. Six more Besigye districts are slated to be split in 2009-2010, meaning that more than half of the districts won by the opposition in 2006 will have been significantly altered by the next presidential election in 2011.

Comment: Re-Districting as Re-Election Strategy

¶ 110. (SBU) It is difficult to identify a clear pattern to new district creation as many also occur in areas which supported President Museveni. Some new districts appear designed to weaken opposition support by elevating the status of local constituencies and giving the NRM an opportunity to reward key groups and individuals with government appointments. Other districts seem designed to shore up support in pro-NRM areas where Museveni may be slipping, or quiet areas critical of the central government. Whatever the logic for creating so many new districts, the NRM clearly hopes the addition of more districts will lead to more votes in 2011.

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